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P87s

THE
SHEPHERD'S WELL.

A Play.

BY THOMAS POWELL.



Price One Shilling.

From the Author
of 2

18-48

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BY
THOMAS POWELL.



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DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

SIR CHARLES USHERWOOD.

ERNEST, *his Son.*

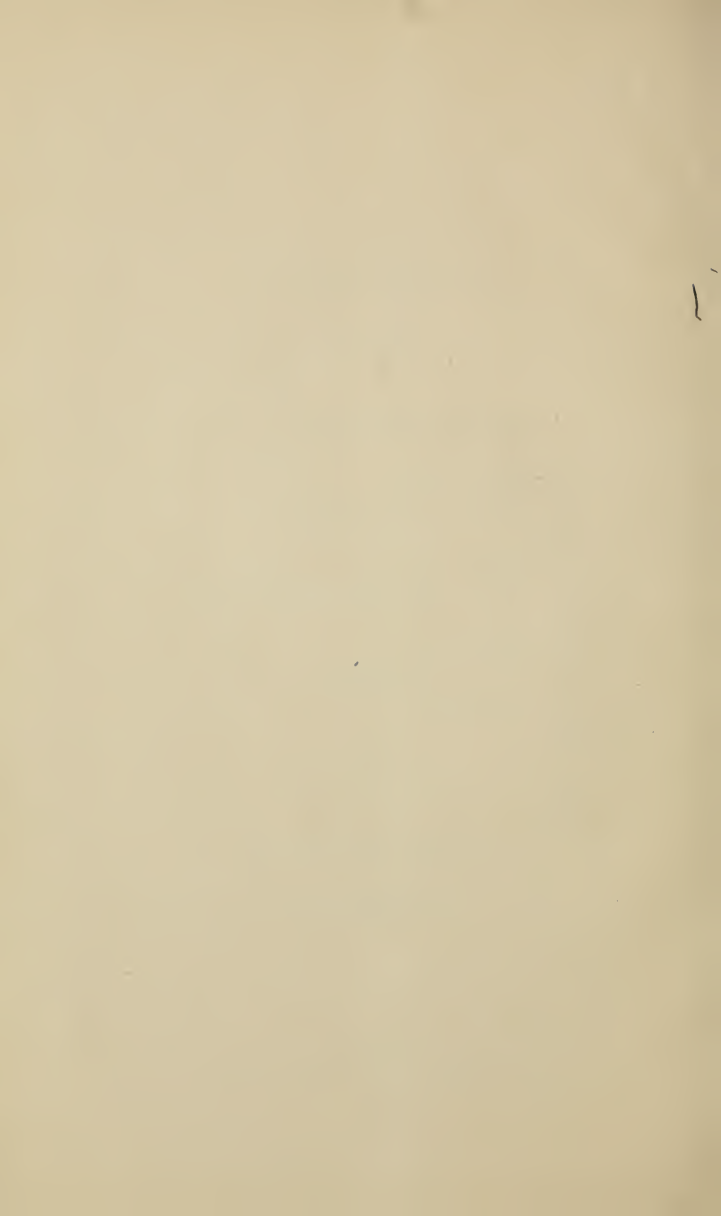
ALBERT, *betrothed to Maud.*

MAUD, }
ALICE, } *Daughters of Sir Charles.*

EUSTACE, }
WILFRED, } *Domestics.*

In the reign of Charles the First.

Period,—Three days.



THE
SHEPHERD'S WELL.

ACT THE FIRST.

Time,—Afternoon.

SCENE I.—*An Apartment in Bromley Hall.*

Enter ALICE and MAUD.

ALICE.

HE comes to-night say you, sweet Maud?

MAUD.

He does,

Dear sister. My whole being seems to know
That he is drawing near me, for I feel
Lit with a brighter spirit. Alice! child,
What happy days stored in the future wait us!
When I am married, we must live together
Till you become a happy bride like me.

ALICE.

What! and so leave our father lonely?

MAUD.

He would accompany you,—Ernest also.

Mark you, sweet girl; a pretty plan I have.

Six months in every year shall you and I

Still house together: first at Bromley Hall

Three months we'll stay, your blithe and happy guests;

Then, when we've left you for a week or so,

You'll come, and let us play the hosts.

ALICE.

Art sure

Albert will be so very fond of us?

Forsooth, he'll say, "Maud, when I married you,

I married not your sister and your brother,

And that old gentleman your gray-haired sire."

Perchance yourself may think us in the way,

And love us for our absence.

MAUD.

Wrong not thus

My Albert's nature. He will love you all,—

Nay, does: he loves you for my sake. Sir Charles

Thinks him, you know, a very paragon.

ALICE, *laughing*.

Which to be sure he is, but you don't think so.

MAUD, *not noticing the interruption.*

Albert, too, loves our father quite as much
As though he were his own. Is it not sweet
That every thing should join to make such music ?

ALICE.

Ernest, too, loves him, and 'tis natural that !
Lovers so called are hard to understand ;
But war unites these terrible companions
In as close fellowship as conspiracy
Against a teacher or a governess
Unites two girls at home.

MAUD.

Ernest once told me
He never heard my Albert say a word
That would, if uttered at his dying hour,
Disturb the hovering saints.

ALICE.

Well, Maud, you boast
A marvel for a lover, there's no doubt,
And I shall gain a phoenix for a brother !
Nothing like love to make us maidens craze,
And shame our sober minutes. Oh, wild Cupid !

MAUD.

Dear Alice, speak not in so light a vein.
Love is the highest faculty of life,

And not a foible for a jesting lip.
Love begins sooner even than with sisters :
It has its cradle in the mother's hope
Long ere we see the light ; her heart becomes
The shrine from which unconscious blessings fall ;
Her loving face the Heaven to which our prayers
Are silently addressed, (and oh ! foretaste
Of Love's celestial nature,) ever heard
And granted with a smile ! The father then
Dawns on the infant heart : by slow degrees
The sweet variety of household ties
Make their abode in the delighted soul
In order due ; the throne still vacant kept
In full expectance of that crowning day
When some predestined spirit gathers up
Into one offering its scattered wealth,
And gives all as a tribute gladly paid.
Oh, Alice ! I am talking to the air,
For if you ever felt what I have felt,
You would despise my poverty of speech ;
And if you have *not* felt what I have felt,
My words are music to a deaf man's ear.

ALICE.

Love must be more than I can comprehend,
For it has roused your meekness to a fire,

Which makes your eyes flash like the midnight stars.

MAUD.

Well may they, for the thought of seeing him
Puts them in heaven. Oh, there will come a time
When you will think my words tame as the strings
That slumber on the harp, ere the wind woos them !

ALICE.

Till then, dear trusting sister, let me see
Yourself but blest, and 'twill suffice for me.

[*Exeunt.*

SCENE II.—*Another Apartment in the Hall.*

Enter SIR CHARLES, ERNEST, and ALBERT.

SIR CHARLES.

A double blessing, truly, my dear child—
Children, I should say. You are both my sons !
For, Albert, you are come to marry Maud.
So love shall link us all,—those that are gone
With those on earth,—heaven and sweet earth together,
In joy and happy tears. My heart leaps up
To see you safe. How left you all at York ?

ALBERT.

Dear sir, I never saw you look so young.

SIR CHARLES.

Of course not, boys. But how fare our good friends
At York ?

ALBERT.

All well, and send a thousand loves.
And those at home I hope, sir, fare as well !

SIR CHARLES.

All, all, as well as love-sick fancy can.
Fair Maud, I warrant you, this very minute
Is counting on her taper finger tips
The weary minutes till she sees you both.
Ernest, my child, come let me hear you talk.
I feel so happy, that my tongue will wag
Without the guide of reason !

ERNEST.

Dearest sir,

I am o'erjoyed to find you all in health ;
For I must own that as we came in sight
Of the old trees, there fell on me a shade
Of such strange apprehension and vague doubt,
(Hope's idle children ever !) that, till Albert
Jested it from me, I had half resolved
To halt, and send my servant from the inn
To know if all fared well.

ALBERT.

'Tis true, Sir Charles,

I had to rally my dear brother here,
And tell him that he was in love himself
With some unwieldy-ankled dame in York.

ERNEST, *laughing*.

That thought was, I confess, too much for me,
And turned my fear to a more desperate dread.

SIR CHARLES.

Dread ! Well, I'd not be frightened, were I you,
At any ankle. I have known small ankles
Bring large disasters, and good lusty ones
Bear,—never mind. Well may you have a wife
From brave old Yorkshire : 'tis a noble place
For lasses and for horses. Let us go
And share your presence with my gentle girls.
Be sure of this,—that one will lecture you,
Son Albert, for your lack of lover's wit
In finding out the father e're you've sighed
A lover's salutation at her feet !
Come, let us to them, while there's hope of pardon.

[*Exeunt*.

SCENE III.—*A Room in Bromley Hall.*ALICE, *alone.*

Who would have thought that Maud, that quiet soul,
So tranquil and composed through all the griefs
That shake the human heart, could let this love
Work such a difference in her steadfast nature ?
Loud and loquacious in this Albert's praise,
She makes me half dislike him e're I've seen him.
Albert 'says this,' Albert 'says that,' quoth she.
This pleases Albert: that displeases Albert !
She'll tire the man himself with her idolatry,
And make him tyrannous in self-defence.

Enter ALBERT, leading MAUD by the hand.

MAUD.

Dear Alice ! Albert craves a kiss of you
To break the ice of strangeness.

ALICE.

Nay, dear Maud,
Pr'ythee be not so childish. I would fain
Be bold enough to contradict you there.
Albert would never crave so poor a boon.

ALBERT.

Fair lady, 'twas your sister's own misdeed ;
I had not dared to venture on such freedom !

She, I confess, with her sweet smiling logic
Trapped me to *somewhat* of so bold a speech.
But not to trespass on your tolerance,
I venture to salute your hand, avow
How much I prize the sister of dear Maud,
And pray to be admitted to her heart
As an adopted brother.

ALICE.

Gentle sir,
You sure have studied compliment, and thrown
Grace into speech !

MAUD.

Nay, 'twas a grave oration,
Worthy the eldest of all brothers, Alice.
Answer him, pray, in style as tragical.

ALICE, *regarding* Albert *very attentively*.

My sister's gayer—wilder, I should say,
Than I have seen her since she used to swing
With Ernest in the play-ground. She intends,
Methinks, to be a little girl again.

ALBERT, *also regarding* Alice.

Fair Alice, Maud has seldom these gay moods ;
So pr'ythee do not chide then.

ALICE.

Nay, good sir !

'Tis me she oftener chides for gaiety,
And calls me '*her wild flower*'—because I grow
In my own fashion, doubtless, she would say,
But courtesy forbids. I am a weed,
That grows too fast, and somewhat out of grace.

ALBERT, *aside to Maud.*

Truly, you never gave your sister's voice
Its fitting praise; and then her face and air,
They are alive with beauty! Why, dear Maud,
Conceal her manifold perfections from me?

MAUD, *aside to Albert.*

I told you, Albert, she was good and lovely.
Could I say more, though I had ransacked speech
To find harmonious phrases?

ALBERT, *aside to Maud.*

She's like you,—
Very like you, though her long tresses fall,
Down her white shoulders with more carelessness.

ALICE.

Your journey hither has been very quick,—
So Ernest told me.

ALBERT.

Nay, I thought it slow.

ALICE.

Love lengthens or diminishes a journey

Beyond all magic, I have often heard;
And therefore, as dear Ernest's *not* in love,
While you, sir, *are*, your clocks did not agree.

ALBERT, *aside*.

I should have thought it longer had I guessed
The grace and beauty of this matchless creature!
What ease! what blushes playing in and out,
As though it were some spirit of ecstasy,
Hiding, and then returning! Maud!—but no!

MAUD.

Dear Albert, are you for a walk across
The meadows? You can while the time away,
Imparting all the idle thoughts that float
In happy brains, when blest with those they love.

ALBERT.

'Twill be a walk as into paradise.
Perchance your gentle sister may bestow
Her presence on us?

ALICE.

Rather, I will meet you.

MAUD.

Nay, come at once.

ALBERT.

Oh, pr'ythee leave us not.

ALICE.

I will rejoin you very speedily.

MAUD.

Tarry not, Alice. We shall long to hear
Your merry voice ring through the forest trees.

*[Exeunt Maud and Albert : as Albert is about to go,
he turns to Alice ; they gaze at each other.]*

ALICE, alone.

I marvel not that Maud admires this Albert.
I never saw a man, till I saw him,
That came up to my notion of a man.
A meeting of the heights of force and grace !
I feel as though I had been all my life
In a vague dream, and that this very hour
I had awakened in another world
And found a treasure it were death to find ;
But which, when found, can ne'er be left behind.
Conscience, arise ! and drive him from my mind.

[Exit.]

(Two days elapse before the second Act begins.)

ACT THE SECOND.

SCENE I.—*An Apartment in Bromley Hall.*MAUD, *alone.*

He loves her—thinks and speaks of no one else —
Avoids my gaze—replies to me with kindness,
But 'tis a cold and mournful kindness; never
Looks straight and sweet into my thankful eyes,
As he was wont—therefore no longer loves me!
He never could have loved me, or why change
E're I had given any cause of change,
Through the mere vision of a brighter face:
Therefore he shall not wed me, but wed her,—
The thoughtless girl, who, even now confessed
Upon my bosom, while her poor heart beat
Like to a fluttering dove who just has reached
Her dove-cote, chased there by some fierce-eyed hawk.
Poor Alice! I could not have played your part,
Nor you played mine. Doubtless we have our tasks
Given out by one, whose all discerning eye
Selects those fittest for the work required.
Oh, that I were a bird, a tree, a flower,

Or e'en a blade of grass, that I might feel
The scythe pass over me, and cut me down.
My love was but a vapour, which the sun
Draws up to heaven, as though it would create
A glorious star; but as the people gaze,
It falls a fading meteor to the earth.
My path is clear, e'en for my own repose.
Could I feel happy, knowing that my joy
Took root and flourished in another's grief?
And that a sister's! No,—tis nobler far,
'Tis happier far, to cast the idol *self*
From the high pinnacle where old custom placed it,
And dash it into fragments, and so tread
That monster into dust, and on the spot,
Where once a heathen temple stood, to rear
An altar sacred to unselfishness.
The thought lends exaltation to my heart,
And my soul, like an eagle, stretches out
Its mighty wings, and with unshrinking eye
Soars far aloft, intent alone on heaven.
Ah! Albert comes. One moment shall test all,
And I will act according to the test.
He comes!—he hastes! Is it for love of me?
O God! if he should haste for love of me!
If he has waked, and finds he loves me still.

Enter ALBERT.

ALBERT.

Maud, my sweet maid, how like you are to Alice,
When you move hastily. I thought 'twas she.
Nay, what still drooping? thus all yesterday
You were, and then again the day before,
So that e'en I began to doubt . . . what, think you?

MAUD.

Whether *you* loved?

ALBERT.

Nay, whether I was welcome.

MAUD.

Which of the two discoveries feared you most?

ALBERT.

Feared most? And have I then indeed displeased you?
Have you discovered, what in truth I feared,
That I was but half worthy of this hand?
You take it from me. Ah! is that my sentence?

MAUD, *aside, with secret vehemence.*

I pray to God that he will make me worthy
Of his great pity and support. (*To Albert.*) Your pardon.
There is a secret kept for these two days,
Betwixt us two, unspoken; yet well known
To both, at least well guess'd, and far more proper
For me to speak than you; the more (pray bear with me)

As there is yet another secret, known
To myself only, which will make the first
Much fitter to be spoken : nay, most fit,
And most imperative !

ALBERT.

You speak enigmas !

MAUD.

Not as to *both* the secrets ; *one* you know
Well, and have feared to speak it. Speak it *not* then,
Except into the ears of her whose right
The topic has become ; and as you speak it,
Mix with it the discovery of another,
Discovered by myself and of myself,
Which makes your topic honorable and just,
The only right good measure.

ALBERT.

Nay, by all——

MAUD, *interrupting him.*

Oh ! spare

Your love and my self-love all useless words ;
For vanity can miss a worshipper,
E'en where its love was but a fantasy,
Else had I spoken sooner. You guessed, truly,
You were *not welcome* ; not as I supposed ;
My *self-love* welcomed you, but in my heart

(You know what gives me boldness, sir, to own it,)

And what may in the owning spare the shame—

(*After a pause.*) I find I loved you *not* !

ALBERT, *aside*.

Is't true !—She faints !

[*He supports her.*

MAUD, *recovered*.

Send Alice to me. See what vanity

Costs us indeed, and what it might have cost us.

You know all now. Let all three quickly know ;

And look not at me, nor approach me thus :

It is no longer fitting. To depart

In silence is your duty, and your grace.

ALBERT, *aside*.

Is't possible the rapture that I feel

Can yet feel mournful ? nay, feel mortified,

E'en while my feet seem winged to depart ?

Oh ! vanity indeed, and yet to have

A doubt of her, were foppery vainer still.

(*Aloud.*) What excellence enjoins I do ! (*Aside.*) She rests

With firmness in the chair, and turns aside.

(*Aloud.*) Hereafter be my saint 'twixt earth and heaven.

[*Exit*

MAUD, *still speaking quietly, and clasping her hands.*

Praise ! praise and thanks ! Support me through it all,

Sweet heaven, to-day, and let me die to-morrow.

I feel a strength arising 'mid my weakness

Promising both. To-day, support me, heaven ;

And then sweet earth receive me. How did it happen?—

[*Looks round.*

He's gone ! and there's a blank in all the world,

And Alice will come smiling, and not fill

In the great void the smallest space of it.

How went I through that perilous ordeal

I scarce can tell. I cannot recollect

The sequence of my words. I have a vague

Impression, that at first they came in slow

And half-suppressed ejaculations, dimmed

Almost to indistinctness by the quick

Wild beating of my heart. I had a hope

That it would beat itself to death, as birds

Dash out their tiny lives against the bars

Of the drear cage which keep them from the skies ;

And then I told him that *I loved him not.*

Merciful Heavens ! that I could have lied

All this, and not fell dead ! Now have I, like

A desperate pilot, cast the argosy

In which I had entrusted all my wealth,

On the sharp rocks of ruin. There is now

Nothing for me, but some devouring wave

To rush out from the ocean to the shore,
On which I, like a dreary wreck, am strown,
And sweep me into the absorbing sea.

*Enter ALICE, who rushes and throws herself on
Maud's neck.*

ALICE.

Maud! Maud! dear Maud! sister of sister's! more
A guardian angel than an earthly creature!
Oh! will you, sure you cannot love me still?

MAUD.

As well as such a heart as mine can love.

ALICE.

A heart as yours, dear Maud! Oh, would that mine
Were worthy of its love.

MAUD.

No thanks, no thanks;

For I deserve none. Need I tell you that?

Now, Alice, we must all this news impart

To Ernest and our father. You must bid

Albert unfold the matter to Sir Charles.

I will tell Ernest.

ALICE.

That is terrible!

The thought of it nigh drowns my very joy.

MAUD.

Bid Albert tell our father every thing ;
Not sparing me, nor the mistake I made
For want of knowledge of my own intent.

ALICE.

Dearest and best !

MAUD.

Alice, no more of that ;
You turn aside the current of my thoughts,
And half bewilder me.

ALICE.

How sad you look. (*After a pause,*)
Maud, tell me this. Surely you have not played
So idly with your heart, as throw away
Your Albert's love, and now find out you wronged
Yourself, and so repent. Remember, Maud,
You wrung the secret from me. I had died
With it fast buried in me, like a grave
That holds the dead till the last trump shall sound.
You forced it from me,—said you loved him not,
Save as a sister. Said you not all this ?

MAUD.

I did, and more.

ALICE.

Oh, Maud ! now answer me.

Do you repent? Upon your answer I
Hang like a criminal betwixt life and death !

MAUD, *after a pause.*

No ! I do not repent ! Now leave me, Alice.
Time rolls apace, I must in quiet think
Upon the surest plan to gain our sire
And brother Ernest over to the change.

ALICE.

Kiss me, dear Maud.

MAUD, *kissing her.*

Now leave me, sister Alice ;
I'll come when I have seen our brother Ernest.

[*Exit* Alice.]

MAUD, *alone.*

Now let me weep away the mountain weight
That presses on my brain : the truest joys
Are evermore born weeping. Had she stayed
Another instant, I had sunk beneath
The dread suppression, and proclaimed aloud
My woman's weakness ; as it was she half
Suspected me. I must efface the least
Suspicion ! 'Twere indeed to render vain
A noble sacrifice, and, ere the wreath
Of triumph graced the victim's brow, to sink
The altar yet unreached, and so receive
Pity and scorn instead of grateful thanks.

[*Exit.*]

SCENE II.—*An Apartment in Bromley Hall.*

Enter SIR CHARLES and ALBERT, in dispute.

SIR CHARLES.

Nay, sir, that cannot be ; surely you mix
The names confusedly. Not marry Maud !
But change for Alice ! What has come to you,
Or what think you of me ? Do you suppose
I am a man who keep my girls for you
To pick and choose from ?

ALBERT.

Nay, but hear me, sir.

SIR CHARLES.

Sir, I have heard too much. Not marry Maud !

ALBERT.

It is the result of her own wish, Sir Charles.

SIR CHARLES.

It cannot be : you've tampered with her will.
And you say Alice loves you ; that is worse.
How dare you sully, sir, my daughter's fame ;
Declare her vile, and wanton like yourself.

ALBERT.

By Heaven ! I say not an ill word of either,
But their own thoughts !

SIR CHARLES.

Then, sir, I cast her from me,
As I do you.

Enter ERNEST.

ERNEST.

What chafes you thus, good father?

SIR CHARLES.

That which will chafe you also when you hear it.

ERNEST.

For Heaven's sake let me hear.

SIR CHARLES.

Tell it him, sir.

He will not marry Maud!

ERNEST.

Impossible!

SIR CHARLES.

But wishes to exchange for Alice! Fancy it!

Did'st ever hear such baseness?

ERNEST, *turning to* Albert.

Pr'ythee, Albert,

Unravel me this mystery. Our good father

Strangely mistakes you for some villain.

ALBERT.

Villain!

ERNEST.

What else, sir, would you call the man that made

Such wanton and accursed mockery
In your own house ?

SIR CHARLES.

Your answer, sir, to that !

ALBERT.

Be patient with me, Ernest, while I tell
A tale as wondrous to myself as you.
When I came here with you I had not seen
Your sister Alice, but was bent to wed
The beauteous Maud ; but when I saw fair Alice,
She, I discovered, was the creature born
(Against my will itself) to be my fate ;
And, strange to say, *she* felt the self same truth.
But stranger far than all : as our loves grew,
Maud felt that hers had been but cold esteem,
So that herself became the arbitress,
The willing and unlooked for arbitress,
Pronouncing judgment on our frightened hearts,
And leading them to peace. Maud's is the deed !
Maud first discerned the signs of love in Alice :
Maud wrung the truth from Alice, made it mine ;
And Maud, to Alice's repeated prayers
That she would speak the whole unfaltering truth,
Pronounced us, in the sight of Heaven, as free
As her own just and ever-honoured heart.

ERNEST.

I listen patiently, because with scorn !
Do you believe this devil, sir ? Resign
Maud, if he please, but he shall ne'er wed Alice.
What think you of us, sir ? Dost think us honest ?
Or that we keep our English hearth for you
To desecrate with wantonness ? Perchance
'Tis an excuse to shuffle off your troth
With Maud. It needed no base lie for that.

ALBERT.

I brook not insult, sir. That passes all
The bounds of human sufferance ;—so draw !

[*Half unsheathing his sword.*

I'd rather lose my love than stain my honour.

ERNEST, *half drawing.*

You have already stained your soldier's truth
By gross deception. As for drawing, sir,
We're of one mind——

ALBERT, *drawing his sword.*

Now I forget the sister,
And only feel the brother's insolence.

SIR CHARLES, *interposing.*

He is not worthy of your vengeance, Ernest.
Stain not my floor with his vile blood. (*To Albert,*) Begone !

ERNEST.

Good father, do not come between our wrath.

Enter MAUD.

MAUD.

Swords drawn ! What means this ? Albert, upon you
I have some claim ; so sheathe that murderous thing.
Nay, if you fight, my body is the mark !
Ernest, my brother Ernest ! I know all
The cause of this contention : 'tis my fault,
Dear father and dear Albert,—nay, it came
Unwittingly. Retire : I have some speech
For Ernest's private ear. *[Taking Ernest's hand.*

My own sweet brother !

Put that worst righter of all human wrongs
Into its scabbard ; 'tis a wretched toy.
The man who seeks to right his injured honour
With such a weapon, cares not for God's law,
But is the slave of fashion's vain decree,
And fears the arrogant world more than his God
And his own reason ; therefore, he's a coward !

[Ernest returns his sword to the scabbard.

Thanks, my own dear, sweet Ernest,—thousand thanks.
Sirs, by your leave, we would be here alone.

*[Sir Charles and Albert exeunt severally : Albert
and Ernest regard each other sternly.*

ERNEST.

Maud, is it true that Albert loves our Alice,
And weds not you ?

MAUD.

He weds not me, dear Ernest ;
And more, it is my own deliberate act.
So banish anger from your breast, and cherish
Albert and Alice as the affianced pair.

ERNEST, *vehemently*.

Never, by Heaven ! They both are base and black,
As you are good and lovely.

MAUD.

Do you love me,
Ernest ?—Say, do you love me ? Have I ever
Played falsely with your judgment ? Do you hold
Your Maud as dearly to your heart, as when
You said she was your rule and guide of action ?

ERNEST.

It is because I love you, dearest Maud,
I feel the foul indignity and wrong
Albert has put upon you. Alice, too,
She's much to blame.—Blame ? 'tis too light a word.

MAUD.

Nay, be not harsh with either. Love has sent
A blindness o'er them. From the first 'tis I

Have been to blame, not Alice ; the sole spot
In the bright sun of her unthinking nature,
(I mean her thoughtless selfishness) has drawn
Its root and flower from my ill-judged nurture.
When that sweet saint, our gentle mother, died,
And left us little Alice as the seedling
We were to rear to flowering womanhood,
Do you remember we, just five years old,
Said in our childish prattle she should be
The only thing we cared for ; that we would
Look on her as a little angel sent
To dry those tears which else had flowed for ever ;
And that our mother, from the holy sky,
Would bless us for our love of little Alice.
And now, because she thwarts us, for the first,
Perchance the only time, in all her life,
You'd cast her from you as a weed. Bethink you,
Dear Ernest, of our mother in the sky.

ERNEST.

Maud, say no more ; tutor me not to baseness.
The dust of our brave ancestors would burst
From its sepulchral marble to avenge
This infamy, if I were tame.

MAUD.

If you

Cast Alice from you, I must follow her.
I cannot throw, if you can, from the heart
Those memories which now are part of me,
When she, a little infant, learned from us
Each word she knows ; and when at first the sounds
Came from her tiny lips, and they were dark
And unintelligible to all,—to me
They were a music understood, and felt
In all the perfect music of a voice
Which has a *heart* to listen,—not an ear,
Thick crusted with the cruelty of earth.
You know how I have spoilt her. From the first
I stood the second in my soul's esteem.
Had I a flower, and she but looked at it,
That instant it was hers ; and when I ran
First to our father for his morning kiss,
If Alice were at hand I let her take
That blessing first. You see how much I nurtured
Her thoughtlessness.

ERNEST.

To me these make her crime
The greater.

MAUD.

Nay, it is no crime,—'tis nature.
These things, dear Ernest, make it natural ;

Therefore we must forgive it.

ERNEST.

How came you
To know she loved this Albert? Did she tell
With vile effrontery the unblushing fact?

MAUD.

Listen, dear Ernest: you will see she is
A creature more for pardon and for pity,
Than for your anger. 'Twas two nights ago
I mused upon my pillow, full of thoughts
That would not let me slumber, when I deemed
My sister spoke to me. I listened,—then
Heard Albert's name pronounced: at this I sat
Upright in bed:—again his name, and then
She murmured out the secret of her love.
When morning came, the love-sick girl awoke.
I questioned her. She blushed, and looked confused,
Drooping her head as though she dared not meet
The loving scrutiny of a sister's eye.
I pressed her closer; left her no escape:
Still she was either silent or evasive.
Then threw I off the mask, and word by word
Repeated the confession of her sleep.
She paused an instant, then around my neck
She threw her arms, and sobbed out all the truth.

You see, dear brother, it is all my fault.
Now, Ernest, if you ever loved your Maud,
If ever we have hopes of Heaven's great pardon,
And by the memory of our sainted mother,
Whose eye e'en now beholds us talking here,
I charge you love, as you have ever loved,
Our sister Alice, and forget the past ;
And when you meet with Albert, think of him
As one who loves that little child whose steps
We've guided from her infancy.—What, silent ?
Now, Ernest, promise me !

ERNEST.

I must consider
The matter further.

MAUD.

You shall promise me !

ERNEST, *breaking from her*.

Not on a moment's impulse ; let us talk
More of this on the morrow. Come, sweet Maud !

[*Exeunt.*]



ACT THE THIRD.

SCENE I.—*A retired part of the Garden.*MAUD, *alone.*

THEIR purpose is too clear ; their angry looks,
When parting from each other, were, alas !
Significant of evil. Wretched Maud !
This springs from your unhappy love for Albert.
It had, perchance, been better to have reasoned
With Alice on the folly of her love,
And left the great designs of God to work,
Nor like a rash intruder marred the calm
And equal flow of human circumstance.

Enter a SERVANT.

Whom seek you now ?

SERVANT.

Our master's friend and guest,
Albert. I thought you might, my lady, know
Where I should find him.

MAUD.

What have you to say,
When you shall find him ?

SERVANT.

I have nought to say ;

Only a letter here from my young master,
Your brother Ernest, to deliver.

MAUD.

Give it to me :

Most carefully I will take charge of it.

*[Servant gives the letter, and exit.]*MAUD, *turning over the letter.*

The hour has been when I had cried out shame
On such a base proceeding. There are times
When the inferior virtues must give way ;
And yet the past hangs o'er me as a spell,
So that I scarce can break the fragile seal
That keeps this secret in. Nay,—it must be !

[Breaks open the letter.]

There, Maud, the seal is broken,—never more
To close again.

[Reads.]

“SIR,—My sister's luckless interference spared you
at that moment the certain chastisement that waits you.
To discard one sister and to woo the other, finds little
favour in my sight. Meet me this evening at the Shep-
herd's Well, one hour past curfew, with your rapier, and
you will find me waiting to chastise your villainy. .

ERNEST.”

'Tis as my fears surmised ! But how prevent
The threatened meeting ? If I should destroy
The letter 'twill not serve : Ernest will wait
The approach of Albert. He goes not ; then Ernest
Returns indignant back, and brands him coward !
Great Heaven ! oh, send me wit to meet this juncture.
(*After a pause.*) I have it. No—impossible ! my senses
Will never bear me through the trial. Why not ?
They bore me bravely through a worse ; they were
As true to me when I gave up that heart,
On which alone my every joy was placed,
Where I had hoped in after years to find
Foretaste of heaven,—they bore me through that peril !
This can but end in death ;—death were relief
And blessing when compared to daily life,
To my slow wandering through the wilderness
Of weary and interminable years,
While every crawling minute heavier grows
To press me slowly to despair's deep grave !
My death will be the sacrifice to heal
This deadly feud. I was the hapless cause,
And thus I pay the needful penalty !
I will throw Albert's cloak around me ; wear
His hat that slouches over half the face,
And the tall feather will increase my height,

And God will lend me strength to grasp the sword :

'Twill need none to receive my brother's steel !

And ere I die, I'll bind him with an oath,

To bury all his vengeance in my grave !

I shall have past away, and time will bring

To Alice and her lover—not yours, Maud,—

A day, when looking back through sunny tears,

Made beautiful and sanctified by time,

Into a gentle pensiveness, they'll kneel

Upon my grave ; and with hand locked in hand,

And voices tremulous with love, will say,

“ Here slumbers one who died to make us blest ! ”

Ernest approaches. 'Tis within an hour

Of the terrific meeting. Lend me, God,

A tongue to charm him, while I make one more

Attempt to avert this dread catastrophe.

Father in heaven ! turn his heart to pity.

Enter ERNEST.

ERNEST, *aside.*

One kiss of Maud ; it may be that I fall,—

And 'tis for her. Albert's a dexterous swordsman.

(*Aloud.*) Maud, my own Maud ! I came to beg a kiss.

MAUD, *drying her tears.*

To beg, sweet Ernest ? Whose are they but yours ?

(*Gaily.*) No lover now to share my kisses with you.

[*He kisses her cheek, and sighs.*]

What means that sigh, my brother ? Have I lost
The power to cheer you ?

ERNEST.

Did I sigh, sweet Maud ?

MAUD.

Ernest, I have a favour to implore,
Which you must grant me. Will you promise me ?

ERNEST.

Nay ; let me hear what 'tis, before I leap
So blindly in the dark.

MAUD.

Ernest, dear Ernest !

Forget the past ; take Alice to your heart,
And Albert to your favour. Or if you
Must hate the one who was the cause of all,
Hate me. 'Twas all my deed. But oh ! forego
Your enmity to Albert. Must I turn
A beggar to you, Ernest, and be scorned ?

ERNEST.

Maud ! I had hoped you would have spared me this.
Till now your lightest word to me has been
A bond of strong command ; but on this point

I am a soldier, and brook not contumely.

I cannot overlook his scorn of you.

MAUD.

For the last time, dear Ernest, I implore you

To spare us all this agony of grief.

Think of our father. (*Aside.*) Oh, thou God in heaven !

Have pity and incline his heart to mercy.

ERNEST.

To-morrow I will talk to you on this.

One kiss, sweet Maud. I'll talk on this to-morrow. [*Going.*

MAUD, *wildly.*

Oh ! leave me not, dear Ernest, leave me not !

Stay, and I'll seek no farther. Let us walk

For one sweet hour and talk of other things.

ERNEST.

To-morrow. [*Breaking from her. Exit.*

MAUD, *alone.*

The heavens are deaf. One solace yet remains,

Grief's only refuge, paradise of Peace,

Beautiful death, that like a music steals

On the distractions of this tangled world !

Thou only cutter of the Gordian knot

Called life ! thou healer of all broken hearts,

I come to thee. (*After a pause,*) I have not strength

To walk, and I can never reach the well.

The curfew long has tolled. Alas! my knees
Knock feebly 'gainst each other. Oh, sweet heaven!
How cold I grow; and mists o'ercloud my sight.
Have mercy, Heaven! I cannot reach the well.

[*Slowly totters out.*]

SCENE II.—*The Servants' Hall.*

Enter EUSTACE and WILFRED.

EUSTACE.

I tell you, Master Wilfred, that you're wrong,
And the fair Mistress Alice marries Albert.

WILFRED.

Then 'tis a sudden change: for 'twas on Sunday
I heard our gentle mistress, Lady Maud,
In her mild quiet way tell Barnaby
That Jane, his daughter, should go live with her,
For she was soon to wed. Now, lad, what say you?

EUSTACE.

Then 'tis a custom in this part of the world,
To let the lover court one sister and wed t'other.

WILFRED.

What mean you, Master Eustace?

EUSTACE.

I mean this:

That ever since our goodly cavalier
Has been at Bromley Hall, he has done nothing
But stroll about with our young Lady Alice.

WILFRED.

Well, that may be ; but surely I have ears
If you have eyes, and 'twas but t'other night
When our good master, brave Sir Charles, said thus :
“ Maud,—Alice has not seen your Albert, has she ? ”
And Lady Maud said, “ Never, my dear father.”
Now, how the deuce could this said Albert love
A maid he'd never seen ?

EUSTACE.

Oh ! rich folks do
A world of curious things that we should laugh at.
That is no reason, Wilfred.

WILFRED.

Well, I'm puzzled.
For you say one thing, and I think another,
And both seem very likely.

EUSTACE.

Are the doors shut ?
Then come you nearer, Wilfred ; and I'll tell you
What I suspect will make this wonder clear.

[Wilfred goes close to Eustace.]

WILFRED.

Well, am I near enough? Prithee proceed.

You've roused my curiosity like a stag.

EUSTACE.

Now, Wilfred, you must know that gentlefolks—

That is, the greater part of them, are fools.

WILFRED.

Is this the mighty secret? I knew that,

When I found out I was'nt one of them.

And that also made you discover it.

EUSTACE.

Well, since you think that is not wonderful,

What say you, when I tell you that Sir Charles

Told the old Vicar by the church-yard yesterday,—

I was behind the ivy-wall, and heard

What our good master told him;—it was this :

That Albert came to marry our young mistress,

(God bless her heart!) the charitable Maud.

Now mark you this. Our mistress Alice never

Had seen this Albert, nor had he seen Alice;

And when they saw each other t'other night,

Fell straight in love, just as you did with Judith,

Because, forsooth, she was another man's.

WILFRED.

Come, lose no time, good Eustace, but go on.

EUSTACE.

Well, as good fortune would have it, our lady,

Young mistress Maud——

Enter a SERVANT.

SERVANT.

Sir Charles has been waiting in the blue room for you near half an hour.

WILFRED.

By our Lady! I forgot. I cannot wait now, but will quickly come back to the Hall, when you must finish it.

EUSTACE.

I warrant that you'll gape like a grave at the last day when you hear it. *[Exeunt.*



ACT THE FOURTH.

Time,—Evening.

SCENE I.—*The Shepherd's Well.*

Enter ERNEST, hurriedly.

Not here! 'Tis fortunate. I am somewhat late,

For Maud seemed bent on frustrating my plan.

'Tis well I am first. Hah! the moon's up already,

Hanging behind the clustering trees as though
She knew the deadly purpose of our meeting,
And would not lend her gentle light to aid us.
Oh, what a mockery is life ! how full
Of sorrows and regrets ! till nature holds
The strife no longer, but at one wild bound
Gives grief the slip, and leaps into the dark !
Joy is more fleeting than the early dew
Which, startled from its leaf by the bird's wing,
Falls off to unregarded death ; and yet
A drop of water is a world to some,
Full of quick life and slaughterous agonies.
Proud man may be a creature, poor as those
That throng the drop, and this supposed huge world
But a gross bubble in the starry waste,
That ever like a mighty ocean rolls
In silent and compulsory dismay.

[*The church clock chimes ; Ernest pauses.*]

Another quarter chimes ! He comes not sure ;
Yet was he ever brave. Still there are found
Men who in battle have fought valiantly
And routed squadrons ; but when pitted 'gainst
A solitary foe have quailed, and lost
By that one fault the harvest of a life.
How strangely dreams infect the mind, and seem

Like shadows flung by death's pale hand to gloom
The human spirit. I had one last night :—
Methought I woke up from my 'customed sleep,
And found 'twas dark ; and yet I knew 'twas day
In the mid summer, with its lavish breath
Of incense-hearted flowers, and full-flushed bloom
Of luscious fruitage purpled by the sun.
I threw the lattice back in pale dismay,
And saw the stars arrayed with dreadful brightness,
Shining in awful silence ! All the lanes
Were thronged with palsied multitudes, on whom
Fell a dim whisper that the sun had died,
And that we stood upon the imminent brink,
When all would crumble like a parchéd scroll.
The air was one huge groan, when lo ! the star
On which we stood gave way, and I fell down
Headlong, o'erwhelmed through infinite abyss.
Another quarter chimes ! He dares not come. [*A pause.*
He comes !—no longer to change Maud for Alice,
Nor Alice for some cheek of newer gloss,
If there's a skill, half equal to the scorn,
In this indignant hand. Be't as it may,
This night shall roll with all its heedless pomp,
Its dumb and dread indifference of stars,
Over the pallid clay of one of us.

Enter MAUD, disguised as Albert, slowly.

ERNEST, *fiercely.*

The valiant make amends for coming late

By being earnest; let us lose no time

In idle parley.

[*Draws.*

[*Maud holds out her sword. Ernest rushes at her, and after a thrust or two she falls, Ernest throwing his sword down.*

Hah! guilt—paralysed!

Marry one sister now, and scorn the other! [*Exit hastily.*



SCENE II.—*A Room in Bromley Hall.*

Enter ALBERT and ALICE.

ALBERT.

This hour, this peace, this sweet security,
This present life, and all our life to come,
We owe to Maud.

ALICE.

Maud is a matchless spirit,
Dwelling alone above her sex. We all
Shrink to mere women by the side of her.

ALBERT.

There never was a heart so truly noble.

ALICE.

Art sure, some day, you'll not repent your choice ?
Reason itself must even now condemn you.

ALBERT.

Nay, sweetest soul ! love is not ruled by reason ;
Something far higher is the lord of love,
Something compelling reason's self to stoop
To the o'er-mastering might of loveliness.
Reason—the despot ! cold and arrogant,
That drives more people mad than all the creeds
Which goad poor human nature,—even he
Worships the god of love !

ALICE.

Sweet ! did you know
That Maud has well nigh won o'er brother Ernest
To our espousals ?

ALBERT.

Not so fast, dear Alice :
Ernest looks fiercely on the change. I doubt
If he consent.

ALICE.

Oh ! leave it all to Maud.
She has a tongue whose music charms his soul,

As though he were a lovelorn mariner,'
Who, pacing on the deck some moonlight night,
Fancies he hears his wife's or children's voice
Steal on the shadows of the silent world,
Calmed by the sense of blessing.

ALBERT.

May it prove so !
But my heart bodes some trouble with your brother.

ALICE.

It is not wonderful that he resents it.
Maud ever was his idol, and has been
The chief companion of his closest thoughts :
He never loved me half so much as Maud.

ALBERT.

Now I think on't, Ernest and Maud are twins.

ALICE.

Nor, till he joined the army, ever parted.
I often laughed at both, and called them lovers.
"Ernest," quoth Maud, "see what a glorious star."
And then 'twas "Maud, nay look at yonder one :"
And if he saw a flower of brighter hue
Or fairer shape than common, he would pluck
The little gem to grace his idol's breast.

ALBERT.

Love has a magic, Alice. Are you not
A different being since you loved me first ?

ALICE.

As night from day ; as silence doubtless feels
When gentle music floats upon its void,
And stirs it with a soul ; or as the world,
When glowing dawn unveils its amorous eyes
To woo the earth to cast off night, and live
In day's imperial smile.

ALBERT.

How bravely you
Speak in those metaphors. Love works a marvel :
Talk on, and I'll be still the listening noon.

ALICE.

Ere love came I felt dark ; all thoughts and hopes
Were heaped in a strange chaos, as old dreams
Whose shape has gone, but which, piled up like clouds,
Frown ponderous mountains on the black horizon,
Which has no rising, nor yet setting, sun
To purple them with glory or with light.
But when you came, it seemed as though a dove
Moved o'er the formless surface of my life,
And to the music of seraphic thought
A world of joy sprang forth. To think, dear Albert,
That we shall have one home.—What music dwells
In that bewitching word !

ALBERT.

You ne'er can feel

That music, till you've roamed in foreign lands.
I well remember, Alice, when I came
From starry Greece,—I call it starry Greece,
For the bright flashing stars shine all night there,
And song and beauty, like an atmosphere,
Cling lovingly to that delicious clime ;
It is so full of beauty and delight,
That one would deem his spirit lifted up
From the dull-thoughted earth, and placed upon
The brightest star of heaven !

ALICE.

But what is it
That you remember ? Some fair Grecian maid,
Whose eyes seemed wondrous lode-stars to your soul ?

ALBERT.

'Tis well ; you have recalled me from the star,
And brought me back to the cold earth again.
Homeward we sailed, and passed the fruitful isle,—
Great Rome's exhaustless granary. 'Twas night,
But fiery-hearted Etna was awake,
And, like a roaring giant chained to earth,
Raved out his fierce defiance to the gods.
The barque flew on : we passed the pillars where
Afric and Europe hold their mountains back,
To let the impetuous waves rush headlong by.

One break of day, before the golden sun
Had lit the ocean with its glowing kiss,
I saw the regal rocks of England rise
Out of the hazy distance, and I felt
As one who, sailing on a dreary waste,
Bursts on a world of music unawares.
Such charm, sweet Alice, has the sight of home.

*Enter ERNEST, who, on seeing Albert, staggers to
the back of the scene.*

ERNEST.

Great God ! what shape
Confounds me ? Surely I am in a dream !

ALICE, going up to him.

Dear brother, are you ill ? Why gaze you thus ?

ERNEST.

What man is that ?

ALICE.

What man ? 'Tis Albert, sure.
You play a part that fits you very strangely.

ALBERT.

His wonder seems unfeigned. May Albert ask
The cause of this new marvel ?

ERNEST.

His voice ! Great Heaven,

Walk the dead thus ? I'm rushing on to madness,
And cannot stop my senses in their flight.

ALBERT.

Do the dead walk ? Ernest, as we are men,
And bound up in a mutual family—— [*Approaching him.*

ERNEST.

Avaunt ! thou fiend, avaunt ! Touch not my sister.
Alice, that is a spectre ! not a man !—
Albert is slain. That is a spectre, sure,
Walking the world in scornful wickedness.

ALICE.

Dear Ernest, talk not in so wild a vein.
What has disturbed you ? Let me take your hand.

ERNEST.

Hah ! can it be ?—the cunning, coward wretch !
Let me be sure he lives. Your hand ! Come near me.
I cannot walk a step to you. Your hand !

ALICE.

His wits are gone ! Sweet heavens ! Alas ! dear Albert,
Indulge his whim, and give him what he asks.

[*Albert gives his hand, which Ernest takes and presses
in amazement : then, after a pause, throws it vio-
lently and contemptuously away from him.*

ALBERT.

Nay, sir, I cannot thus——

ALICE.

Dear Albert, leave him.

He must be mad:—see how he stands. I'll send

Our sister Maud to him.

[*Exeunt.*]ERNEST, *calling after him.*

Wizard! or coward wretch!

Albert, return! Cowardly——

[*Sinks in a chair.*]

Am I alive—awake—or do I lie

In some most horrible, some hellish dream,

Where grinning fiends play havoc with the mind?

I saw him fall:—I could not be mistaken.

That groan was surely from a dying man!

And then the pressure 'gainst my sword. I must

Have pierced him deeply.—Ah! my sword will show.

[*Feeling for his sword.*]

Not here? I must have flung it by the well;

And yet I felt his hand,—'twas warm with life.

It must be so, a subtle vagabond!

A cunning trick, forsooth, to save his life:

Pretend to fall as though I'd reached his heart;—

And here before me carelessly in chat

With Alice, as though toying through the time.

This 'wilders me again! Before me here?

I came with all my speed. The moon was up;

He never could have passed me. Ah! he might

Have scaled the orchard wall, so gained on me.

I'll haste and brand him coward to his teeth.

Albert! thou coward!—thou shalt not escape! [Exit.

ACT THE FIFTH.

SCENE I.—*The Court-yard of Bromley Hall.*

Enter SIR CHARLES and WILFRED.

SIR CHARLES.

A CAVALIER found murdered by the well?

Know you his name?

WILFRED.

No, sir.

SIR CHARLES.

Who murdered him?

WILFRED.

Nor can I tell you that. 'Tis but an instant

Since Eustace, pale with fright, rushed in and told me.

SIR CHARLES.

Send out the men in every direction

To find the villain; and let some proceed

To bear the murdered gentleman within.

WILFRED.

Where shall they bear him, please you ?

SIR CHARLES.

Straight to the hall. It is my part to take

All measures to detect the criminal.

Infamous men ! to stain our fields with blood.

Go, Wilfred, forthwith : use all diligence

To apprehend the murderer. You will find me,

If any thing transpires, within the hall. [Wilfred *exit*.

One trouble follows on another's heels :

'Twas yesterday I had that hot dispute

With Albert, touching his mad fantasy

In changing Maud for Alice. Well, the girls

Have won me over, but with no good grace,

Though Maud is such a noble girl, that I

Feel half assured her counsel must be right.

And since she does not love the fickle swain,

And Alice does, why it must e'en be so.

Now, then, to see about this murdered knight.

Alas ! alas ! woes ever come in shoals.

[*Exit*.

SCENE II.—*The Great Hall.*

Domestics engaged in anxious and earnest conversation.

Enter SIR CHARLES, ALBERT, ALICE, *and* WILFRED.

SIR CHARLES.

No tidings yet, good Wilfred, of the murderer ?

WILFRED.

Not any, sir. But those I sent have not
Returned yet from the search.

SIR CHARLES.

Have you, as I desired,
Sent men to bear the hapless cavalier,
That we at least may ascertain his name ?

WILFRED.

I have, sir, and expect their swift approach.
'Tis a good hour since I despatched them forth.

Enter ERNEST.

ERNEST.

What means all this ?

SIR CHARLES.

Hast thou not heard, good son ?
A cavalier's found murdered ?

ERNEST, *much agitated.*

What ! at the Shepherd's Well ?

SIR CHARLES.

How well you guess. Where did you hear of it?

ERNEST.

Nay, till you named it:—said you not the well?

SIR CHARLES.

You took the sentence from me.

ERNEST, *aside*.

Oh, great God!

What mystery is this?

[*Retires*.

Enter EUSTACE.

EUSTACE.

The servants with the body have arrived,

And bear it straightway here.

SIR CHARLES.

Where's Maud? Her calm

Deliberate judgment is my best support

In all these trials.

ALICE.

This reminds me, father,

I have not seen her yet. 'Tis early morn;

I will go fetch her from her meditations.

[*Exit*.

Enter Men bearing the body.

ALBERT.

My cloak! my hat, too!—Ah!

[*Ernest slowly approaches the body*.

ERNEST.

Most wonderful ! let us behold the face.

[*Takes off the hat, and staggering back, shrieks out.*

'Tis Maud ! 'tis Maud !—Earth, yawn and swallow me.

[*Lets the hat fall, and stands aghast.*

SIR CHARLES.

O God in heaven, spare my aged sight !

Now let me die !—My child !— [Albert supports him.

ALBERT.

I have no word

Of comfort for you,—'tis past utterance.

Enter ALICE.

ALICE.

Maud is not to be found.

SIR CHARLES, *frantically.*

She *is* found. There !—

She's murdered. Would that we could also find

The murderer. I would tear him limb from limb,

And curse him like a thrice-damned fiend of hell !

[Ernest groans.

Ernest ! why you are tame. Where is the man

Who did this horrible and hellish deed ?

I will not close these eyes till I have found him,

And wreaked a father's curse upon his head !

[Ernest groans.

Enter a SERVANT.

SERVANT.

Sir Charles ! this sword, all stained with blood, was lying close to the cavalier.

[*Ernest starts. Sir Charles takes it.*

SIR CHARLES.

'Tis Ernest's sword !

[*Ernest snatches the sword furiously from his father, and stabs himself with it.—He falls.*

ERNEST, *raising himself,—they gather round him.*

This sword has told what I lacked heart to tell.

I murdered Maud !—Out, villain, (*seeing Albert*) from my sight !

I see all now. Death, like a flash of fire,
Lays all things bare. The blow that reached *her* heart
Was meant for *yours*, thou curst inconstant man !
She, like a matchless angel as she was,
Saved your vile life by laying down her own ;
And I, blind fool, have slain her. Oh ! I feel
Like one who has been all his life-time blest
With peace of conscience, at his dying hour
Falls into mortal enmity with God,
And perishes eternally ! Let me kiss
Her cheek. I would have died to save it from

The wind. Oh, nearer!—let me lay my head
Upon her breast. Maud!—my own dear-twin sister!

*[They bear the body to Ernest; as they place it beside
him, the letter falls out; Ernest grasps it.]*

We are together now. I hear her voice
Soothing me, like a mother, to my rest.
While sleep and darkness, like a cloud, descend
And bear me into silence. Maud! sweet Maud! *[Dies.]*

THE END.

